

Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/123574/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Tholens, Simone ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6579-4118> 2017.
Bosnia's paralysed peace [Book Review]. International Affairs 93 (1) , pp. 217-218. 10.1093/ia/iw049 file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iw049>
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iw049>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Bosnia's Paralysed Peace. By Christopher Bennett. London: Hurst & Company. 2016. 388 pp. £35/15. isbn 1849040532. Not available as e-book.

Simone Tholens, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University

Beginning from the choice of book cover (one of Dubioza Kolektiv's bizarrely intelligent records 'Apsurdistan') to the solution proposed to the Bosnian question, this book makes a bold effort to stand out from the by now lengthy bibliography available on the international community's peacebuilding experiment in Bosnia. Aiming to utilize the insights from a long-term observer of Bosnia to not (only) lament the ills of the country, but to actually propose a strategy to eclipse its current status as '*Reductio ad Absurdum*', Christopher Bennett has penned a historically solid, analytically robust and comprehensive account of the road from the Dayton Peace Agreement to the present Europeanisation strategies aimed at creating a viable state. The former International Crisis Group (ICG) reporter and communications director of the Office of the High Representative and of the EU Special Representative, knows the country and its many international actors extremely well, and takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the thick and thin of Bosnian post-war politics. At times almost tediously detailed, there is no doubt that this book presents a comprehensive view of the intricacy characterising international-local dynamics over the past 20 years. And here lies its strength; if one wish to read only one book to get introduced to Bosnia's recent political history, this could very well be it. Inside perspectives on the many failed international attempts to build a multi-ethnic polity dot the book, and contribute to a deeper understanding of how poorly managed, naïve and ill designed the liberal peacebuilding project has been in Bosnia – or, as he writes, how "International policy had been akin to pushing a square peg into a round hole" (p. xxii). It also illustrates the path dependency of the international trajectory: from insisting on preserving the Dayton Agreement, to holding premature elections already in September 1996 (excellently recounted in Chapter 5, "Elections at Any Price"), many current problems can be explained by previous mistakes and failure to shift direction at critical junctures. The resultant situation is one that we know all too well: entrenched positions by the former warring parties whose existence is locked in a fragile – but individually profitable – status quo, propped up by international troops and money. Feeding into a well-established body of literature on the disastrous effects of neoliberal peacebuilding, this book succinctly disentangle the international-local interactions that has produced the current situation of political deadlock along ethno-nationalist fault lines.

The book does at times take on a quasi-scientific veneer, which is not entirely convincing given the already rich literature which more systematically tackle democracy and divided countries. However, where the book stands out is in its final chapter, “Changing the Logic of Bosnian Politics”, where Bennett proposes a fresh solution to Bosnia’s current deadlock. It was needed, after 240 pages of details as to how this ‘Paralysed Peace’ came about. What Bennett proposes is perhaps more innovative than he admits: that Bosnia adopts a form of shared sovereignty, where Croatia and Serbia would enter into more transparent and formal relationship with Bosnia, and construct a ‘double confederation’, designed in such a way that no community (Bosniak, Croat, Serb, Other) would be able to dominate the other. This would ensure the ‘societal security’ of each community, while eclipsing the straightjacket which is the ‘Bosnian question’: Bosnia would become a “bridge rather than a battleground between Croatia and Serbia” (p. 260). In order to ensure the good intentions of this arrangement, the European Union would serve as the external guarantor, Bennett suggests, modelled on the Allies’ long-term executive powers retained over Germany and Austria from 1945 to 1991. Moreover, the system would be served by a rather complicated electoral system based on centripetal principles of bringing people together, while taking seriously their group loyalty. It is a radical, bold and nothing but revolutionary proposal. Yet, while this arrangement is a) not acceptable to Bosniaks under the current conditions, b) would imply the dissolution of Republika Srpska, while c) would meet resistance also in many capitals outside of the Western Balkans, fearful of economic costs and political precedents, it is a refreshingly innovative thought in the current European climate characterised by a reversion to nationalistic solutions to global problems. Moreover, it is refreshing from the point of view of the Western Balkans, whose future rests with finding a constructive solution to the bitter and factional regional political landscape. I can only hope that Bennett’s book find an audience, among young Bosniaks with ambitions for their country, and among international actors with sufficient clout and patience to abandon the current strategy and think revolutionary in Bosnia. For as Bennet reminds us, changing the current pessimism on Bosnian politics will require nothing short of a paradigm shift, and a rethink of the many contentious points that formed the backdrop to the war itself: self-determination, statehood, sovereignty, definitions of nation, and the institutions of representative democracy.